Session Five:

# AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND PANEL:

# DISCOVERY, PRESERVATION, AND MEMORIALIZATION

## New York's African Burial Ground Complex in Diasporic Perspective

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# New York's African Burial Ground Mortuary Complex in Diasporic Perspective

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**The purpose of this paper is to describe this mortuary complex and to place it in a Diasporic perspective. This means integrating findings from the skeletal research, demography, ethnographic, historical, and archaeological research to pose questions about the eighteenth century African community in New York.**

The African Burial Ground needs to be placed in both global and local contexts. Globally, the trade in African captives involves a variety of African and European people of different social, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds and areas, no doubt with diverse notions of socio-cultural roles and proper burial practices. Locally, New York City was always a polyglot town, with the Dutch, English, Huguenot, Native, and African peoples most prominent, but including numerous other minorities as well. Thus, the mortuary complex at the African Burial Ground is the product of mortuary rituals and burial ceremonies that had symbolic and social significance to their African funeral traditions as well as traditions of other cultural groups in contact with these African communities.

We assume that the material culture found in colonial contexts acquire meaning only in a particular socio-cultural contexts. Indeed, most categories of material culture involving a similar range of objects, were used by Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans, though often in quite different ways. We refer to this condition as multivalency. Multivalency exists when an object or set of objects takes on very different meanings for different social groups, with dominating groups often totally ignorant of the meaning system of subordinated groups. The multivalent function of these objects is suggested by their archaeological context. The daunting task of analyzing and interpreting the archaeological materials from the African Burial Ground is to capture these meanings and their social relations, and to discover alternative understandings and practices associated with them.

## Historic Background of the African Burial Ground

We suspect that the cemetery was in use during at least part of the seventeenth century, although the first document mentioning the African Burial Ground dates to 1712. This early reference is a letter written by Chaplain John Sharpe in which he complains about “the Heathenish rites performed at the grave.” Later, Europeans living on the northern boundaries of the city complained about the loud nighttime ceremonial drumming and chanting that was taking place at the cemetery. Thus, it seems that New York’s African Burial Ground community did to some degree control their own rituals and symbolism around their mortuary activities.

## The Location of the Cemetery

Few Africans in colonial New York lived in houses of their own. Almost all enslaved Africans lived within the domicile of Europeans. Thus, Caribbean type courtyard burials or African-type house floor burials were impossible. The spatial and social placement of the cemetery on the landscape of colonial New York afforded a relatively private setting for the performance of mortuary rites, and sacred space outside the town. This is consistent with mortuary practices in some societies in western and central Africa.

In early New York, community-formation among Africans from diverse backgrounds required getting together away from their households, in a separate place from Europeans. The occasion of the funeral and the location of the cemetery, therefore, would have been particularly important in providing space

for creating, expressing, and reproducing a creolized African identity, which emerged within a context of colonial captivity.

The Collect Pond area, located north of the city's main residential area throughout the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth centuries, was no doubt familiar to Africans who labored in the noxious industries there and on farms in the northern part of the island. Furthermore, the cemetery was located near the farms granted to Africans by the Dutch West India Company during the 1640s.

## Mortuary Patterns at the African Burial Ground

The program of spatial analysis of the African Burial Ground is concerned with establishing "archaeological context." Key to understanding the spatial relationships at the Burial Ground is our stratigraphic analysis. We are trying to establish temporal sequences of burials by looking at their relationships in vertical and horizontal space, to see what kinds of differences correspond to earlier and later burials. These differences may be reflected in changes in health patterns, quality of life, places of origin, demography, or mortuary practices.

One of the most important analyses that we have begun is of coffin style. 94% of the peopled buried in the excavated portion of the African Burial Ground were in coffins, a total of 401, while 26 individuals were interred without coffins. With this large a number of coffin burials, it will be possible to develop a typology. Variability in coffins should be related to several factors: changes in coffin style and construction techniques over time, differences among colonial New York's artisans (whether African or European) who built the coffins, differences in cost, and differences in beliefs about what was proper for burial.

We will be inventorying the coffin hardware, and at the same time we will continue using the field records and drawings to determine shapes and sizes, and sometimes construction details. The development of a useful typology is still ahead, but promises to be an important means for both describing the Burial Ground and interpreting its variability.

So far we have distinguished three basic coffin shapes: hexagonal, tapered, and rectangular. There are 34% of the total burial population whose coffin shapes remain indeterminate. Of the 254 coffins with discernable shapes, 10% are tapered, 13% are rectangular, and 77% are hexagonal.

Although individuals of all ages and both sexes are distributed throughout the Burial Ground, those individuals not interred in coffins appear to be gender and age specific and not randomly distributed. For instance, children and infants appear to, rarely if ever, be buried under adults. Because stratigraphic analysis is very problematic, we must emphasize that our discussions are very preliminary as to numbers and these numbers may change as research continues.

The scanty documentation indicates that various kinds of coffin decoration were available. Though we know the range of prices that Africans would have had to pay to have coffins built at one shop, African artisans may have priced their wares differently for specific kingroups, fraternal organization members or secret burial societies. It is likely that some Africans would have donated their labor in preparing coffins for family, community members, or the family would have collected from mourners.

Coffin hardware is the most common artifact category found at the Burial Ground. Decorative coffin hardware was rare for any ethnic group before 1830 in North America and represented "high status" mortuary adornment. At the African Burial Ground there are a total of seven burials with decorative coffin hardware.

One such burial with tacks on the inside of the coffin is Burial 176 a 22-25 year-old man buried in a tapered coffin with six secure distinct inverted bail coffin handles (1720-50) that could have been used to carry the coffin. Each handle had a wrought iron escutcheon plate screwed to the coffin and had unique chevrons or backed arrow motifs. Similar motifs have been found on coffin hardware from eighteenth century English coffins. There were two on each sideboard, and one each at the headboard and footboard. Research into the hardware used in the manufacture and decoration of coffins is in the early stages of analysis.

Burial in coffins, then, may represent an Akan practice which became widespread in colonial New York's broader African community; or a belief that those buried here were ultimately going to be taken home and therefore were not placed directly in the ground; or active resistance on the part of New York's enslaved Africans, who insisted their enslavers pay for (but not attend or participate in) decent funerals.

Most interments without coffins (23) are males and are found north of a series of postholes aligned along an east-west axis in the central part of the excavated portion of the burial ground. These coffin-less burials appear to be oriented to one another in a series of three to four north-south columns.

Of the African Burial Ground burials without coffins, it appears that variations in the grave cut exist. Five male burials

are cut with an oblong boundary. The remaining burials with no coffins have grave cuts that are rectangular or square in shape. This may be the result of excavation methods, but we cannot rule out the possibility of these being intentional grave cuts made during interment.

## Multiple Burials

The analysis of sequential relationships within and among groups of graves is underway. Although most of the grave shafts contained a single coffin or individual, we do have a number of cases of multiple burials. By multiple burials we mean more than one individual buried in the same grave cut, or as in the case of some women and children, in the same coffin.

Unlike the coffin-less burials none of these burials, however, is separated from the general burial population. Most are women interred with men or either children. However, we have one case of a child wearing a necklace of beads, is interred within the same grave shaft as a 30 year-old man but in separate coffins.

This may be indicative of a father-child, or uncle, nephew, bond, a social relationship often ignored by European investigators, but culturally significant among Africans. Too often, we as western scholars ignore the relationships of African and African-American men to children, and often impose matrifocal models of kinship onto data pertaining to African Americans. Here, it is important to bear in mind that gender is as much about men as it is about women.

In African Diasporic cemeteries the variation in burial orientation seems to be minimal. At the African Burial Ground there appears to have been a standard form of internment. All burials are extended in the supine (face up) position and most, 98%, are oriented east-west with heads lying west and feet east. There are also a number of individuals whose heads are facing east as well as a small number of individuals whose bodies are oriented north south. The great majority have the orientation, with possible seasonal shifting with the sunset.

Although supine, head lying west and feet facing east, orientation is typical of Christian burials and traditional African American burials these positions and orientations are also common in African mortuary practices. These patterns may also reflect Muslim burials.

A few grave markers were recorded at the site, but only in the far western area, where excavation revealed the former ground surface. Since that surface was not encountered over most of the excavated burial ground, we do not know what sorts of markers or grave goods were placed on most graves. A total of seven grave markers were recovered at the African Burial Ground. Four are stone grave markers (like that shown in the slide) that seem to be made of local Manhattan schist.

There are others like these arches of river cobbles in which individual graves were outlined. This was very rare at the site, where in most cases the graves overlapped each other.

There is associated with one 35 year-old man, a cedar grave board/marker with five nails attaching it to the coffin. Wooden grave or head boards are found on eighteenth through twentieth century African descendent and Euro American cemeteries throughout the United States.

Placement of items at grave sites or on coffins at the time of interment is at least suggested by the presence of pottery on at least one coffin and shells on some others.

## Funerary Practices

Preparation of the dead for interment would not have involved outsiders (the "layers out of the dead" as in the nineteenth century). Perhaps family or households members? Perhaps the work of women in particular. Children were wrapped in winding sheets or dressed in shrouds, fastened with pins.

Many adults were also wrapped or shrouded, but some, men in particular, were dressed in clothing.

Buttons, including matched and unmatched sets, were found on a few individuals and are apparently associated exclusively with adult males. Buttons, like beads, can be strung as pendants, or used in charms, and we need to consider all possibilities. A total of six metal buttons were recovered from Burial Six, an adult male, two of which have naval motifs. Without precise information on the location of the buttons we cannot say for certain that the buttons represented a jacket. Thus, these buttons were most likely salvaged from reused clothing and do not appear to represent an individual buried in uniform. In addition to rigorously examining every object associated with each burial we also have to examine the exact placement of buttons within the coffin. For instance, some of the buttons recovered appear to have been used as amulets in necklaces or in strings of beads.

Shroud pins do not need to be identified; they need to be recorded as to their exact location if at all possible, since this can tell us about which individuals were wrapped, and how. Different ways of treating the dead, including details about how they wrapped or shrouded, may reflect ethnic or religious differences (for instance, culture-specific views about the destination of spirits of children who

die), or such differences may reflect change over time, or other factors such as relative poverty and the like.

So far, there are a total of 271 individuals, representing of the total population, that have been examined for evidence of shroud pins and/or textiles. Of these individuals believed to be wearing shrouds 70 representing are children or infants, 22 representing are women and 19 are men. There are another ten persons representing .04% whose sex are indeterminate. Six individuals, of the sampled burial population have shroud pins and/or shroud cloth and buttons. Of these individuals, only one is a woman, while five are men. This suggests that at least some people (mostly men) were buried with both shrouds and clothing.

## Conclusions

The African Burial Ground mortuary complex argues for a distinct suite of practices that can be separated from European norms. We are looking for patterns of behavior that, on the one hand, can be differentiated from European behavior and suggest a distinct conception of the cosmos. On the other hand, to point to aspects of these patterns that suggest African influence—or alternatively the genesis of new and distinct African American worldviews. At a rudimentary level, there are simple comparisons between specific artifacts, traits, or characteristics found in New York and in west and central Africa. While such continuities are important to demonstrate, the real significance lies in the occurrence of suites of characteristics, beginning with the distinctive features of the Burial Ground as a whole and with the combination of features found in individual burials, such as Burial 340.

The exciting thing is that at the African Burial Ground we are starting to put together such a mosaic of features. At least in some instances, there are suites of artifacts and attributes—a view that appears different from that represented in European burials. This is far more exciting than whether or not a particular pipe, bead, or practice originated in Africa. It also avoids these tangential debates as to whether or not this or that feature is “African”. Research will continue to explore the various west and central African mortuary practices and funeral customs as well as Native American, and European mortuary practices in order to explain the mortuary complex witnessed at the African Burial Ground.

# Biographies



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